

The Roots of Our Belief

By Wesley White
Copyright 2008

Countless evangelicals denounce the theology of the Sabbath-keeping Churches of God and assert their interpretation of Scriptures as the only correct one. In this respect, they exhibit the same exclusivism and intolerance that they rightly accuse the Sabbatarian community of having once possessed toward other denominations.

Contrary to what modern evangelicals would have us believe, anti-trinitarianism is not typically embraced by uneducated or weak-minded heretics incapable of grasping the mystery of the trinity. Instead, anti-trinitarianism has historically been associated with enlightenment, scholarship, and religious tolerance. Some of the most rational minds in Christendom, especially in the Church of England, rejected the trinitarian formula as a plausible explanation of the nature and role of Christ.

Anti-trinitarians have been called a variety of names: Unitarians, Socinians, Sabellianians, Arians, and semi-Arians, depending on how they interpret Jesus' divinity. From the Reformation until the 19th century, they were dispersed among many Protestant denominations, where they experienced varying degrees of persecution.

Early Views of Monotheism

As Christianity spread through the Roman Empire, the bitterest complaint against the movement was made against its veneration of Jesus. How could Christians, who worshiped Jesus as a god (Pliny, Epistles 967), claim to be continuing the monotheistic tradition of the God of Israel? Jews and pagans hurled accusations that Christians were nothing more than polytheists. Jesus the man, the detractors noted, made Himself equal to God. Yet what God could perish on a stake? The idea was both offensive and ludicrous. One devastating critic was Celsus the Platonist, who claimed that Jesus acquired magical powers from the Egyptians and used them to make himself out to be a god.

Two millennia afterwards, we still find ourselves embroiled in the same controversy, but with a different slant. Modern monotheism with its emphasis on the oneness of God was not the same concept found in ancient times. Numerous scholars

show that the word “monotheism did not mean for the Hebrews what it means for us today. It did not signify a belief in the existence of one celestial being...On the contrary, the spiritual world, where God is, is filled with creatures...who are actually referred to as ‘gods’ (cf. Ps. 86:8; 96:4; 135:5) and are elsewhere represented as members of God’s heavenly council” (D.S. Russell, *From Early Judaism to Early Church*, 1986, p.76).

Noted scholar Frank Moore Cross has commented: “The Shema (found in Deut. 6) is often misunderstood as such an abstract affirmation of the existence of one God... **Literally translated, it reads, 'Hear o Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone'**...At least in early Israel, Israelite religion did not systematically deny the existence of other gods or divine powers” (*Bible Review*, Oct. 1992).

“By Hellenistic times the phrase Heis Theos, God is One! became a Jewish slogan, but monotheism is an ambiguous concept...The Jewish monotheism of antiquity did not exclude belief in many and diverse supernatural beings aside from God” (Shay J.D. Cohen, *From Maccabees to Mishnah*, 1987, p.81-82). For example, in the Jewish apocalyptic book *The Parables of Enoch*, the date of whose authorship is considered to be pre-70 C.E., the “Son of Man” is presented as pre-existent from all eternity; he is specially related to God, possessing the divine name, sharing the heavenly glory of God, and serving as God’s chosen agent of vengeance and judgment. This book was considered scripture by many early Christians and appears to be quoted in *Jude*.

In fact, modern Jewish concepts of strict monotheism did not fully develop until the Middle Ages. At that time, it became what some scholars call monolatry.

As one authority states,“...the whole history of early Christianity gives us abundant examples of Binitarian thought.” “...Trinitarianism had to fight its way and make good its footing against a strong tendency, both within and without the Church, towards belief in a Godhead of two persons only” (*Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, edited by A. E. J. Rawlinson, 1928, pps. 201, 162).

In order to demonstrate the binitarian monotheism of primitive Christianity, scholar Larry Hurtado examined six features of early Christian devotion--hymns, prayer, use of the name of Christ, the Lord’s Supper, confession of faith in Jesus, and prophetic pronouncements of the risen Christ. “We are dealing with a redefinition of Jewish monotheistic devotion by a group that has to be seen as a movement within Jewish tradition of the early first century C.E. The binitarian shape of early Christian devotion did not result from a clumsy crossbreeding of Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism under the influence of gentile Christians too ill-informed about the Jewish heritage to preserve its [monotheistic] character. Rather in its crucial first stages, we have a significantly new but essentially internal development within the Jewish monotheistic tradition, a mutation within that species of religious devotion” (*One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 1988, p. 130).

Christians after the apostles affirmed their belief in the monotheism of the Old Testament, but also accepted without question both the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ (Otto Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1965, I, 31-32, 59-63). Second-century Christian apologists had little to add on this belief.

But with learned critics like Celsus, Catholics in the third century began to defend their belief in one God against reproaches that Christianity introduced a new form of bi- or tri-theism. Tertullian taught that the Son did not exist as a separate person in the beginning, but was begotten by the Father to accomplish the creation of the world. Origen also saw the Son as subordinate to the Father in existence.

Other Catholics rejected their ideas, asserting there is only one God and denying the full deity of Jesus Christ. This view was represented in early church history by Paul of Samosata, and by the Arians, led by Arius. Arius claimed to “say and think and have taught and teach that the Son is not ungenerated nor a portion of anything ungenerated in any way or out of any substratum. Instead, by choice and will he originated before times and before ages, fully God, only begotten, immutable. And before he was begotten [Ps. 2:7] or created [Prov. 8:22] or defined [Rom. 1:4] or founded [Prov. 8:23], he was not. He was not ungenerated. We are persecuted because we say, The Son has a beginning but God is without beginning.’ The bishop of Nicomedia agreed with him. ‘It is obvious to anyone that what has been made was not before coming into existence. What comes into existence has a beginning of being.’ The slogan of Arius and his allies soon came to be this: ‘There was when he was not’” (Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God*, p.160).

By the fifth century, however, trinitarian forces had won and any other viewpoint was heresy. Because the Catholic Church wielded tremendous power, we find almost no mention of anti-trinitarianism until the Reformation. At that time, nearly every European country had an outbreak of anti-trinitarian opinion.

The Socinian Connection

A highly educated Spaniard named Michael Servetus, who lived during the height of the Inquisition, saw the doctrine of the trinity as a stumbling block to the conversion of Jews and Moslems. He attempted to prepare a convincing defense of the doctrine but discovered instead that it had no basis in scripture. As a result of his *Errors of the Trinity*, written when he was only 20 years old, Servetus was forced to flee to France, where he became a physician and discovered the pulmonary circulation of blood. Condemned as a heretic, he had hoped to reach a group of Unitarian Anabaptists in Italy, which included forty educated men at Vicenza united in a private association. These men were mostly banished from Italy, many of them fleeing to Switzerland, and afterwards to Poland. But Servetus was captured and executed in Geneva with the approval of his bitter enemy, the renowned theologian John Calvin.

One of the Italians, Giorgio Blandrata, a learned physician, accompanied Bona Sforza to Poland when she became the bride of that nation's king. Poland already had groups of anti-trinitarians dating from the 1500s, and Blandrata was able to unite them into the Minor Church of Poland, later led by another Italian refugee, Faustus Socinus. From Socinus the group would take the name by which it is best known in history, the Socinian Church. The Socinians became the most intellectually advanced anti-trinitarian

movement of Europe, contributing to the rise of liberal Protestantism. At their first synod, they decreed: "Everyone has the right not to do things which he feels to be contrary to the word of God. Moreover, all may write according to their conscience, if they do not offend anybody by it" (Stanislas Kot, *Socinianism in Poland. The Social and Political Ideas of the Polish Antitrinitarians*. Translated by Earl Morse Wilbur, Boston, 1957, p. XXII).

Protestants and Catholics alike denounced their tolerance as "the most dangerous of the dogmas of the Socinian sect." Two excellent discussions of Socinianism, which serve as sources for this article, are H. John McLachlan's *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Oxford University Press, 1951), and Earl Morse Wilbur's *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents*, (Harvard University Press, 1952).

In 1602 Socinians established a college at Rakow, from which the Racovian Catechism was issued in 1605. Known as the "Sarmatian Athens," the Socinians' "excellent school was attended at one time by 1,000 students. Philosophy and theology were taught; and associated with it was a publishing-house transferred from Cracow...The prosperity of Socinianism was mainly due to the influence of its great ministers, theologians, and scholars, proceeding from its academic center at Rakow" THE NEW SCHAFF-HERZOG, Vol. 10, p. 489).

Socinians believed that primitive Christianity was preserved by a remnant who can "...discover the supreme good, which is divine truth; the masses, on the other hand...will never choose the best things." Although the Polish Socinians rejected the Jewish Sabbath, a Socinian/Anabaptist group in Transylvania that became known as the Székely Sabbatarians accepted certain rites of Judaism.

The Socinians held that only the Father is truly and uniquely God; although they considered Jesus only human, the Socinians also saw him as prophet, priest and king of the universe, entitled to worship. Their primary difference with Arianism was that the Arians believed in the pre-existence of Christ and the Socinians did not. They employed modern methods of textual criticism, demonstrating that 1 John 5: 7 was an interpolation.

Socinians were also mortalists, rejecting the immortal soul and eternal hellfire as corruptions of the Catholic church. They required believers' baptism, teaching that baptism can take place only after a profession of faith and biblical instruction. A few scholars now admit that "the adoption by English Baptists of the practice of immersion ultimately derived from the Minor Church of Poland...introduced into Holland by the Socinians." Finally, the Socinians promoted the separation of Church and state and practiced foot-washing.

In 1660, the Socinians were expelled from Poland, but by that time Socinian literature had already spread throughout Europe, including Holland and England. The Latin Racovian Catechism edition of 1609 was dedicated to the English King James I. The catechisms created controversy in England; first the King in 1614 and then Parliament decreed that in 1652 they be collected and burned. Nevertheless, the English translation of 1652 made it available to a much wider audience, and in 1672 a member of Parliament complained that Socinian books were selling as openly as the Bible.

The Puritan Revolution in England

When Queen Elizabeth I attempted to establish a national church melding Catholicism with Protestantism, reformers waited patiently for her to purify the new institution. But the biblical primitivism they desired was never implemented. During King James' reign, (1603-1625), Puritans not only became influential in Parliament, but challenged James and his religious policies. James responded by promising to harry them out of the land if they did not conform. By the time Charles I ascended the throne in 1629 and abolished Parliament, the Puritan party had grown so strong that it ultimately led the nation in a civil war.

Despite persecution by English monarchs, Puritanism was fomented in the Church of England through "lectureships," "gadding," and pamphleteering. In market towns magistrates were allowed to engage preachers for weekday sermons or lectures. Between 1560 and 1662 at least 700 clergymen held lectureships in London. Of these at least 60 percent were Puritans (Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships, The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560-1662*, Stanford University Press, California, 1970, p. 172 ff.). As the seventeenth-century author Samuel Clarke mentioned, Puritans, "though living ten or twelve miles asunder, were as intimate and familiar as if they had all been of one household." Groups of puritans would walk for miles to hear a good sermon in what became known as "gadding." They also held private Bible studies and joined with others in fasts.

As a result of civil war, a Puritan-dominated Parliament ruled England from 1640 to 1660. During that time, Baptists, Friends, Shakers, Levelers, Mortalists, Fifth Monarchy Men, Muggletonians and many other nonconformists sought free expression of their religious views. In 1645, Thomas Edwards' *Gangraena* listed 16 sects and 176 miscellaneous "errors, heresies and blasphemies," exclusive of popery and deism.

Having already existed in prior centuries, English anti-trinitarians did not press to become a sect apart from the Church of England. They held closely to most traditional views of the Bible and were described as belonging in theology to one or other of the variants of Arianism. In his letter of 1557 Knox, for example, warned his brethren in Scotland against radical or Anabaptist tendencies including a Christological heresy, which he called Arianism.

Anti-trinitarians were punished by burning at the stake as late as 1612. The establishment of the Commonwealth under the Puritans in 1640 did nothing to stop the persecution of those who rejected the trinity. "Under the commonwealth, Socinianism (represented by Paul Best and John Biddle), Sabellianism (by John Fry), Arianism (by John Knowles, Thomas Collier and Paul Hobson)...had been alike banned and persecuted. The intolerant attitude of both presbyterians and independents was continued after the restoration" (*The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, Vol. X, CHAPTER XVI. *The Literature of Dissent* § 7. 1907-21). The literary giant John Milton was a closet anti-trinitarian, whose private papers revealed his acceptance of this doctrine.

Socinian ideas about the trinity filtered through Oxford scholar John Biddle, the English translator of the *Racovian Catechism*, who first published a pamphlet in 1644 entitled *Twelve Arguments Refuting the Deity of the Holy Spirit*. One of his detractors warned: “Doe not look upon these things, as things a far off, wherein you are little concerned: the evil is at the doore; there is not a Citty, a towne, scarce a village in England, wherein some of this poyson is not poured forth.” Parliament’s 1648 Ordinance for the punishing of blasphemies and heresies prohibited the denial of the Trinity or any Person of the trinity; those who did not disavow antitrinitarianism would “suffer the pains of death...without benefit of Clergy.” Biddle’s early works were burned and he was imprisoned and later exiled for three years.

Numerous tracts by Anglican and nonconformist clergy attempted to counter Socinian views of the trinity. Finally, the Council of State deemed the controversy important enough to ask the eminent Dr. John Owen to prepare a work refuting English Socinianism. His 700-page *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, written in 1655, focused on the writings of Biddle and the Racovian catechism.

But anti-trinitarianism could not be squelched even after the monarchy and Church of England were restored in 1660. The Arian Controversy began in earnest in 1687 with the publication of the *Brief History of the Unitarians or Socinians*. This tract refuted the favorite proof texts of trinitarians, concluding that antitrinitarians should be not prosecuted, but accepted in the Church of England as brethren. This tract was soon followed by *Brief Notes on the Creed of St. Athanasius* and others which were widely read by both clergy and laity. The intelligentsia of that era, Sir Isaac Newton, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and William Whiston, owned Socinian books; they privately and in a few cases publicly expressed their disagreement with the trinity. Whiston, the translator of Josephus’ *Wars of the Jews*, stated in 1728 that “Newton was rumoured to have been the author of an antitrinitarian tract called *The History of the Great Athanasius*’ (p. 413 Stephen Snobelen, “Isaac Newton, heretic: the strategies of a Nicodemite,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 32 [1999], 381-419).

The 1689 Toleration Act, which allowed some dissent, excluded Roman Catholics and anti-trinitarians. As the trinitarian dispute continued to rage, the 1698 Blasphemy Act ordered that anyone who “by Writings, Printing, Teaching, or advised Speaking, deny any one of the Persons in the Holy Trinity to be God,” was to first lose civil rights and any ecclesiastical, civil or military office. The second offence resulted in three years of incarceration. Nevertheless, anti-trititarianism continued to be debated through the next century, although not as vigorously.

At the same time, English Puritans were probably the first to teach that Jesus was none other than YHWH, the God of the Old Testament. Edward Stennet and John Spittlehouse called Christ Jehova Jesus in the 1650s. Anglican Francis Bampfield, a graduate of Oxford, and at one time prebend of Exeter Cathedral, wrote in his 1677 book *The Seventh Day Sabbath - The Desirable Day*, that “The LORD Jesus Christ, who is Redeemer, was Creator...Jehovah Christ as Mediator did himself at Mount Sinai proclaim the law of Ten Words.” His brother, Thomas Bampfield, also held in 1692 that Jesus Christ, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, instituted the Sabbath in the beginning in *An*

enquiry whether the Lord Jesus Christ made the world, and be Jehovah, and gave the moral law? and whether the fourth command be repealed or altered? Thomas had been Speaker of the House of Commons in 1659.

American Concepts

By 1725, anti-trinitarianism had made major inroads: in the first generation after the Puritan era, virtually every nonconformist (non-Anglican Protestant) denomination drifted toward the rejection of the trinity. In 1747, Jonathan Belcher, a Massachusetts Congregationalist and royal governor of New Jersey, immediately began supporting the College of New Jersey. Belcher expressed his consternation at the spiritual condition of Harvard and Yale, where he believed that “Arminianism, Arianism and even Socinianism, in destruction of the doctrines of free grace are daily propagated.”

In the late 18th century, the famous scientist Joseph Priestley brought anti-trinitarianism to the United States, where Henry Grew, whose father belonged to a group of liberals associated with Priestly, absorbed these ideas. Grew was later to have a tremendous impact on the Adventist movement due to his teachings on mortalism/soul-sleeping and the nature of Christ.

New England became a major battleground for Arian /Unitarian ideas during the early 1800s. After nearly two centuries of New England’s leading seminaries (Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, etc.) promoting these concepts, the result was a body of definitely anti-trinitarian churches, whose ministers taught every possible variety of anti-trinitarianism from Arianism to Socinianism. Two of our earliest presidents, John Adams and his son also subscribed to Unitarianism.

Published in 1805, Hosea Ballou's defense of universal salvation, *The Treatise on Atonement*, was the first book published in America to openly reject the doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time, Arianism’s chief proponent, Henry Ware was elected Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard College, beginning the Unitarian Controversy in New England, in which Calvinists and Arminians squabbled over the trinity and divine grace. John Sherman also published in that same year (1805) a book on *One God in One Person Only*, which was the first full defense of anti-trinitarianism.

At that time, only one in nine of the Congregational Churches in Boston, the major religious body in both city and state, could be called orthodox. When Ware was named professor, a storm of protest led to the founding of Andover Theological Seminary in 1808 to prepare a new generation of more orthodox clergy. Other influential Unitarians of that era included William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Harvard Divinity School was distinctly Unitarian from its formation until 1870. Professor Andrews Norton, Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature at Harvard, continued the attack upon the trinity. His *Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrine of Trinitarians*, first published in 1819 in a controversy with Professor Stuart of Andover, became a classic. The controversy reached its height in 1819 and continued until 1833.

By that time, the tenets of anti-trinitarianism had spread and the American Unitarian denomination had been established.

Isolated theologians continued to advance the cause. A Presbyterian minister named John Miller wrote the book *Is God a Trinity* in 1876 which supported anti-trinitarian ideas. Miller believed that the doctrine of the trinity was not biblical and that it greatly hindered the church in reaching out to Jews and Moslems. He emphatically declared the full deity of Jesus Christ.

Another movement also embraced anti-trinitarianism. Two Baptist ministers, Elias Smith and Abner Jones, were among the first to exhort people to use only the Bible (as opposed to the writings of church founders or other leaders) to restore the original teachings of the apostolic church. Beginning at Lyndon, Vermont in 1801, their movement, which later coalesced with similar groups of Presbyterians and Methodists, became known as the Christian Connexion. The Christian Connexion attracted thousands who wanted to be Christians without having to follow denominational practices. The movement could rightly boast that it had no founder such as Luther or Wesley and that each congregation was an independent body capable of governing itself.

Smith in particular was opposed to what he called “monarchy religion.” Urged to put his ideas into writing, he established the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* in 1808. This newsletter was the first distinctively religious newsletter in the United States and has served as the prototype for numerous later publications. A special point of contention with organized churches was the trinity, which was extensively analyzed in the *Herald* from 1811 onward. By 1835, the Christian Connexion counted anti-trititarianism among its doctrines, with leading Unitarian and Christian Connexion ministers sharing ideas and pamphlets. Although collegial, the two groups never joined forces, probably due to differences in church culture.

When William Miller began the Second Advent movement, the Christian Connexion became one of his primary harvest fields. Both Gilbert Cranmer and Joseph Bates, who figured prominently in Church of God history, learned a non-trinitarian view of God from that group. According to Bates, when he was converted in 1827, “Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was impossible for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God, the Father, one and the same being.” Cranmer was baptized into the Christian Church and remained with it until 1842, when he became an Adventist. Early Seventh Day Adventists such as J. N. Loughborough and D. M. Canright shared this view, and James White held a similar belief. This rejection of the trinity and acceptance of an Arian or semi-Arian view of Christ would be the first of many unconventional religious beliefs that the Millerite movement would incorporate.

Adventist pioneers have sometimes been called semi-Arian rather than Arian, because while they believed that Jesus had a beginning, they differed somewhat from the second part of the Arian definition. The Adventists believed that Christ did indeed partake of God's own nature and thus was not merely a creature, even though they held that at some time in eternity God the Father had brought Him into existence. This understanding of Jesus would remain part of the doctrinal beliefs of Church of God

(Seventh Day) until the 1970s, when church leaders acknowledged their previous interpretation of Revelation 3:14 was faulty.

The churches generated by the Millerite movement continued to support a semi-Arian position for a number of years. Henry Grew became a frequent contributor of articles and letters to George Storrs' *Bible Examiner* magazine. In 1857, Grew wrote *An Appeal To Pious Trinitarians* and later penned *The Divine Testimony Concerning The Son of God*, delineating a Christology later adopted by Charles Taze Russell and others. Later, Charles Parham, the first leader of the Pentecostal movement and a proponent of British Israelism, questioned the traditional trinitarian baptismal formula. After 1913, many Pentecostals adopted the oneness of God doctrine.

Another view of Jesus also resurfaced during the 19th century. Alexander MacWhorter of Yale University published a book, *The Memorial Name, Or Yaveh Christ*, in 1857, in which he proved that the Hebrew word Jehovah signifying "I AM," should be Yahveh, signifying, "I will be" and that Yahveh or Jehovah is Christ. This same understanding was publicized in England by a Catholic archbishop named William Smith and would ultimately find acceptance in the British Israel movement.

In 1943, a two-part series titled "The Names of God," appeared in the British-Israel magazine *Destiny*, identifying Jesus with Yahweh. Excerpted from a book of the same title, the article contained the foundation for Herbert Armstrong's later view that Jesus was the God of the Old Testament and that Christians would become part of the God Family.

A Lesson for Today

The Churches of God, like the Socinians, have long believed that their theology restores primitive Christianity. But unlike the Socinians, they have branded those who disbelieve as unconverted, instead of leaving that spiritual classification to the One to whom it properly belongs—Jesus Christ. Rather, they have chosen the way of Catholics and Protestants in suppressing honest questions and differences of opinion.

In The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity, historian Thomas Reeves pointed out in 1996 that "Christianity in American ... tends to be superficial. For one thing, its adherents are poorly educated in the faith. [Pollster] Gallup refers to 'a nation of biblical illiterates' and presents solid evidence: only four in ten Americans know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount; fewer than half of all adults can name the four Gospels of the New Testament; only three teenagers in ten know why Easter is celebrated. 'More than half of all Americans read the Bible less than once a month,' Gallup reports, 'including 24 percent who say they never read it and 6 percent who can't recall the last time they read the Bible.'"

This brief overview of anti-trinitarian thought traces its movement into churches that valued a rational, anti-creedal approach to the Bible, including our own community of believers. Let us never become biblical illiterates but use our minds to prayerfully discern the Word of God.

For more information, check us out DynamicChristianMinistries.org.

Or write to us at:

Dynamic Christian Ministries
Big Sandy TX 75755